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# Significance in African Heritage

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## Abstract

Heritage professionals are at all times called upon to make significant judgments about heritage places/objects. There is a supposition therefore that heritage places or objects have intrinsic values that need to be discovered and assigned. This paper, using various examples from Africa, however, argues that values are not intrinsic to heritage but are a construct of heritage professionals/community, and therefore, a heritage place/object can have various values depending on who is making the judgment. It therefore follows that if values vary according to who is assigning them, then the significant/insignificant of a heritage place and object will also vary from one person/community to another. The paper concludes by arguing that significant/insignificant judgments are hegemonic constructions between contending forces, and therefore, it is difficult to have a universally accepted significant or insignificant judgment.

**Keywords:** heritage, significance, ancestors, insignificant

## 1. Introduction

Cultural Heritage is an expression of the ways of living developed by a community and passed on from generation to generation [1]. It is now widely acknowledged that heritage is not only manifested through tangible forms such as artefacts, buildings or landscapes but also through intangible forms such as voices, values, traditions and oral history [2, 3]. Cultural heritage and especially its intangible dimensions act as a means of preserving the links between the past and the present and also allows the transmission of its different shades and colours to future generations [4–6]. This notion has led to the conservation ethic which argues that for heritage to be available to the future generations, it must be managed [7]. For this management to happen, it is assumed that a community has to have some values or significance for the heritage and this value is determined by an assessment that is governed by a stringent criterion. This premise has led to an entrenchment of practices, mostly Eurocentric, of valuing heritage in the world [8, 9]. Consequently, a number of scholars and institutions, such as Mason [10], Australia ICOMOs [11] and English Heritage [12], just to name a few, have provided various definitions of heritage value typologies. According to Mason [10], heritage values refer to the “positive characteristics or qualities perceived in cultural objects or sites” by a certain community; these values are entrenched by both tangible and intangible elements of the heritage. Mason goes on to propose a typology of heritage as a way of establishing a common ground for expressing heritage values by all concerned and in order to avoid a “black box” scenario where values are “collapsed into an aggregated statement of significance” which makes it difficult to conserve divergent values ([10], 8–10). Mason further argues that the usefulness of his proposed typology is in the fact that it includes various values, therefore making the community know that their values are recognised.

Carter and Bramley [13] see values as the intrinsic and extrinsic qualities of heritage places that are deemed by a person, group or community as important and desirable. Further, they argue that intrinsic values are assessed objectively while extrinsic values are judged by personal, social and cultural standpoints and are, therefore, subjective; in other words, heritage values are seen as being susceptible to nationality, gender, ethnicity, class, religion, poverty, insideness, expertise and age ([14], 213). Therefore, while values are a key factor in heritage formation, however, when there is no social contact, production and dissemination of knowledge as well as spatio-temporal structures in which “such processes can take place, values would simply remain values” [15].

According to the Burra Charter [11, 16, 17], cultural significance is the “aesthetic, historic, scientific or social value for past, present or future generations” ([18], 9–10; [19], 297). These values therefore, need to be carefully understood in order to establish the cultural significance of the heritage place. Further, the Burra Charter, sees cultural significance as a mechanism that assists in assessing the value of places and thus can provide knowledge on the history of the heritage and enable appreciation of that heritage by future generations. The Burra Charter stands out in the fact that it stresses the importance of involving the local community in the determination of the values of the heritage place. Thus, the key concept of a values-based approach is that of stakeholder groups; the approach advocates for the recognition and equal involvement of all types of stakeholder groups and their differing values [20]. As a result, many countries, especially those in Western Europe, North America and Australia, who have embraced the value-based approach to significance, have put much efforts in trying to fully involve communities, especially those perceived as marginalised, in the determination of values of local heritage places. Fredheim and Khalaf [21] however, argue that because of the difficulties involved in interpreting the various values, it is impossible to have a value-based typology that is universally accepted. Johnston [22] argues that the formal adoption of values into criteria and legal frameworks brings in the possibility of imposing a culturally-specific framework that requires values to “fit” into this framework and if they do not fit, they are removed. Unfortunately, however, despite this reservation by Johnson and others, this value-based criterion has been widely accepted globally and it is now being used in determining the significance of a site before inscription, not only on the World Heritage List, but on some countries’ local and National Lists as well ([22], 3). Indeed, in Australia, this value-based typology is what the various state governments use in listing sites in their State lists. Not to be left behind, most countries, especially those in Africa and even some western governments, have also used this value-based typology in determining the significance of their heritage places. For instance, in Kenya, the National Museums Act describes a monument “as a structure which is of public interest by reason of the historic, architectural, traditional, artistic or archaeological interest attached to it” (Government Printer 2006) [23].

The Queensland Heritage Act 1992 defines significance as relating to history, rarity, research potential, the exemplification of particular classes of places, aesthetics, and creative, social or cultural association, or association with a significant person [13]. Thus, for both the Kenyan government and the Queensland state government, an object has value only if it is *historic, aesthetics, architectural, traditional or archaeological*; in other words, if an object does not conform to any of these values, it is not significant, it is insignificant; in other words, this valuing automatically privileges some places/objects over others; it is a comparison process that creates categories of values leading to some objects/places being seen as having important values and thus regarded as significant while other objects/places are seen as having less values and thus regarded as insignificant. The fundamental

assumption of the conferring of significance on an object/place is that significance has realism (that significance is “intrinsic” to objects – in other words, that in spite of what we may want, objects do possess significance on their own) [24]. Therefore, a site with a high social significance (e.g. because it is highly visible in the landscape) might be considered to have great significance, although its intrinsic value to understand the past is not very high.

It should however, be noted that values do change; even in those so called “traditional” communities values are not universally accepted by every member of the community; there are always dissenting voices- people who ascribe different values and hence significance- other than that held by other members of a community, to a place or object. Alternatively, over time, values and significance can also change [25]. This then means that the values professionals ascribe to a place/object may not be universally accepted by all members of a community. In other words, a site can have several values assigned to it by professionals, but if those values do not resonate with the local community, it can be deemed to be insignificant to the community. This is the case with Khami World Heritage site in Zimbabwe. Khami, inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1986, is the second largest Zimbabwe Culture (an archaeological culture that marks the development of complex state systems in southern Africa site) after Great Zimbabwe ([26], 1). Khami together with Great Zimbabwe and Mapungubwe in South Africa, are the only three Zimbabwe Culture sites inscribed on the World Heritage List [26]. The site of Khami was nominated and inscribed into the World Heritage List by heritage professionals and without the input from local community. Thus, the local communities do not consider it significant to them and this has led to, in the words of Sinamai “to the disinheriting of the site by the local populace” ([26], 4). The disinheriting does not stem from the fact that local people were not involved in its nomination, but rather from the fact that as a result of historical facts that has resulted in population movements in the region and shifting identities, the local community no longer have any emotional attachment to the site and thus the locals do not see it as representing their narratives. According to Sinamai ([26], iv), “Khami is an inherited place, with a local community that has forgotten it.” Though Khami is a magnificent monumental site that inspires and is significant to heritage professionals, it is however, insignificant to the local community. This case shows that values and therefore significance and insignificance, are context dependent and “certain cultural settings seem to privilege the production of one type of heritage more than another” ([26], 4). Further, this example shows the difficulties intrinsic in assessing values and assigning significance of a heritage place because of the multiplicity of values and their innately contested and changing nature [13, 27, 28]. This example also shows the difficulties encountered when trying to define a “local community” of any given heritage place [29].

The problem with many values statements is that in most cases they tend to privilege physical – the architectural and archaeological evidence over the social values and the lives of the affected communities or they carry out what Steve Brown calls “fabric over feelings” heritage narrative [30]. According to Brown, a statement of significance for an object or place should also include the emotions. This is because all places/objects that have been used by individuals will always have narratives that give the individual’s perspective of the place and evoke emotions and thus enable readers to have an understanding of the place/object. Further, Brown [30] argues that the “narrative also tells the reader something of time, memory, and place.”

As said before, the desire to attach values to heritage places was not only because of the need to involve communities, especially the marginalised ones, in the management of their heritage places, but also to ensure that heritage needed to be seen



as contributing to the sustainability of these communities. Consequently, heritage was ascribed various values that include economic, political, social, religious, educational and others. Whereas the potential contribution of the other values to sustainability could be seen and have thus, been given prominence in heritage discussions, the potential of the social value on the other hand, has not, especially in Africa, been appreciated and has accordingly, not been given much prominence, and yet it is this value, which much more than all the other values, that ensures the sustainability of African communities. The next part of this paper will consider this value.

## 2. Social value

As individuals or as members of communities, people are all the time engaged with the landscapes where they live or work. According to Byrne et al. ([31], 3) part of this engagement includes “people giving meaning to places through the events in their lives which have taken place” in landscapes. Generations pass knowledge of these events down to each other. Often the events have left no mark on the places or on the landscapes, but people remember what has happened; they keep memories. It is as if people carry around in their heads a map of the landscape which has all these places and their meanings detailed on it. When people walk through particular landscapes, the sight of a place will often trigger the memories and the feelings – good or bad, happy or sad – which go with them. This is the other side of the conversation: it is the landscape talking back. The key thing is that a heritage practitioner, who is a stranger or outsider in these local landscapes, can never discover this world of meaning just by observing a place. They can only know about it by talking to “people giving meaning to places through the events in their lives which have taken place’ in landscapes” ([31], 3). An object/place becomes significant because it is meaningful or it has meaning to a group of individuals or a community. Social value therefore is the distinct meanings that a community, rather than individuals, ascribe to places [32]. In other words, social values are all those values expressed by the community and which fall outside the professional framework [32]. Accordingly, the Australian State of Queensland (2017, 18) has developed the following definition of social significance/social value:

*The social significance of a place is derived from a perceived meaning or symbolic, spiritual or moral value in the place that is important to a particular community or cultural group and which generates a strong sense of attachment*

The Declaration of Oaxaca, prepared by the Mexican Committee of ICOMOS, tries to show how a community’s role in the creation, maintenance and giving meaning to places can be respected. According to the Declaration, the people who create heritage, and for whom it is part of their daily lives, are best placed in conserving this heritage through the continuity of traditional practices [33]. There is a danger of destroying this heritage when the role of defining and conserving this heritage is given to the “experts” as this alienates the traditional keepers from their heritage. In other words, the people who live in a certain place or attached to an object, do not only continue maintaining that place/object, but also that the place/object exists because of the continuous interaction that the people have with it and it is from this interaction that the place/object gets its meaning [32]. Therefore,

these are the ideal people to define the significance of the place. The local people are the ideal ones to define significance because as Meinig [34] argues, the same landscape may have different meanings to different people:

*... even though we gather together and look in the same direction at the same instant, we will not - cannot see - the same landscape. We may certainly agree that we will see many of the same elements - houses, roads, trees, hills -... but such facts take on meaning only through association ... any landscape is composed not only of what lies before our eyes but what lies within our heads.*

A good example of this assertion by Meinig – how a landscape can have different meanings to different people is seen in Chinua Achebe's [35] short story, "Dead Man's Path." This is a story of Michael Obi, a young man who has been appointed as head teacher of a mission school, the Ndume Central School, that is situated in what is considered by the missionaries as a "pagan" area. Obi wants his school to be the perfect, beautiful, and successful school in the mission system. With the help of his wife, he transforms the school compound into an English garden, complete with flowers and hedges around the school buildings. Passing through the school however, and without Obi's knowledge, is a little-used path that connects the village shrine with the local cemetery. When he learns of this path, Obi constructs a fence to block villagers from using the path through the school. Obi informs the village priest about the erection of the fence, and the priest protests the fencing of the path telling Obi that "the whole life of the village depends on it. Our dead relatives depart by it and our ancestors visit us by it" ([35], 249). The priest also warns that if Obi obstructs the path, then he will cut "the path of children coming in to be born" ([35], 249; [36]).

The stance between Obi and the priest is an instance where two people, though from the same community, have different understanding of the significance of the landscape. To the priest and the other villagers, the path through the school, though seldom used, is not only to go to the burial place, where people, who soon will be the ancestors of the living are buried, but it is the path that the living and the dead, the present and the future interact with one another and thus ensure the sustainability of the community; the living (present) use it to bury the dead, the dead who are now ancestors (past) use it to visit the living (present) and the children to be born (future) use it to be born. This is the significance of the landscape that Michael Obi did not understand or he refused to understand because of his conversion to Christianity. This example not only shows how different people recognise the social value of a place/object, but also calls for creation of a methodology of valuing heritage that recognises that the social value (significance/insignificance) of heritage is not only about the past but is about the present and future, because the past is found in the present, and that this awareness is significant for a "future meaningful existence" ([37], 3; [38]). This brings to mind the experience I and my team encountered when in 2013 we were excavating inside Mudzi Mwiru, one of the sacred Mijikenda Kayas of the Kenya coast. Mijikenda kayas, listed in the World Heritage List in 2008, are considered by the Mijikenda people as sacred because they are the abode of their ancestors and a source of the Mijikenda identity [39]. As a result of their sacredness, only initiated elders are allowed to enter the kayas [40]. Therefore, before being allowed to carry out excavations inside the kaya, the Kaya elders had to carry out special ceremonies in order to appease the spirits of the ancestors and also

ask their permission for us to carry out the excavations. Without the ceremonies, it is believed, we could have been harmed by the ancestral spirits. In order to ensure that no harm befell us during the excavations, one of the senior elders stayed with us most of the time of the excavation. In between the excavations however, this elder had to go and join the other elders for a ceremony in another Kaya. The next morning as we started the excavations without the elder, we noticed a green mamba snake coming slowly and perching itself on top of a tree near where we were excavating and stayed there till the end of the day and as we prepared to leave the site, it also left. The snake did this for the 3 days that the elder was absent but disappeared the day the elder rejoined us. When we told the elder about the incident, he said that that was the guardian he had sent to stay with us in order to avoid the wrath of the ancestors. The appearance of the snake may appear insignificant, but to the elders of the Mijikenda, it is an affirmation of the sacredness and therefore significance of the kayas to the ancestors and the local community [39]. Peter Schmidt [41] reports the same visitation of an ancestral spirit in the form of a snake when he was excavating one of the royal palaces of the Rugomora Mahe kingdom in Tanzania. The experience makes Schmidt to conclude that “we must be sensitive to and familiar with the roles that ancestors take in guiding, limiting, and insisting on the manner in which behavior and its materialization take shape” ([41], 61).

The examples above show that, in Africa at least, there is need to be cognizance of the important role that ancestors or spirits play in the construction of the significance or (in)significance of heritage places/ objects; that heritage places/objects are not significant or in(significant) “because of their material value, but for the meaning and sometime also for the spiritual life present in them” [42].

Further, these examples are a challenge “not only of the conventional wisdom surrounding what constitutes value, significance and meaning in places of heritage, but also the decision-making processes that determine what is celebrated or over-looked, and therefore also what is preserved or let go” ([43], 114). In order to know, the value and significance of such places, it needs one “to be “tuned in” to the local cycles and rhythms of nature, while also being aware of the processes of management, inhabitation and place-making they embody and reflect” ([44], 5 quoted in [43], 117).

Social value therefore, is the value that the community would attribute to a place. As shown above, different communities and even groups within the same community, will have different values for the same place depending on the experiences that each community/group has had with that place/object. Further, social value exemplifies how the community assesses meaning at the present time and, thus such meaning is likely to be continually redefined, reviewed and restated. This means that social value of a place/object may change from time to time and that future generations may have a different social value for a place/object from that held by the present generation. For instance, it is now widely accepted that Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a retrogressive practice and most governments in the world have passed legislation banning it and imposing severe penalties amongst those found practising it; the Kenyan government is one of those governments that have enacted legislation outlawing FGM. Despite the existence of the ban however, some members within the Somali and Abagusii ethnic groups of Kenya, still continue the practice, though in secret. More intriguing is that amongst the Abagusii for instance, it has been found out that the people at the forefront of perpetuating the practice are medical practitioners; they are the ones who are hired by parents of girls who are to be initiated to go and carry out the initiation. The continuation of the practise amongst these groups is because it is deemed to have social value within these communities; FGM, in the opinion of these communities, enables young girls to move from youth to adulthood, and more importantly instils in the



girls proper morals and prepares them to be dependable wives and mothers; to these members, FGM or circumcision as they call it, plays a significant role in identifying the “true” daughters of these communities. The groups believe that anybody who has not undergone the rite is still a child and deserves no respect in the community. These FGM adherents have, to paraphrase Dickerson [24], not only recognised the existence of their communities- the Somali and Abagusii, but have also constructed or aim to construct what can be called a “pure” community – one that wants to protect the “integrity” and “traditions” of their ancestors; these members see themselves as having the ethico-political responsibilities towards their communities and therefore have responsibility of making significance judgments over the rest of the people. This making of significant judgments is an exercise of power and authority; the members still practising FGM see themselves as custodians of age-old traditions and therefore have moral authority of ancestors to continue the practise as this is the only way of preserving their communities. This same argument can be extended to the destruction of Bamiyan Buddhas<sup>1</sup> in Afghanistan by the Taliban, who justified the destruction by the argument that erecting of statues was against the tenets of Islam and it was their duty to preserve the purity of Islam by destroying the statues [45]. These are groups who, driven by nostalgia, want to use the supposed significance of a rite, such as FGM or destruction of heritage places “to restore an earlier state of society” ([46], 2). The importance of this value however, is only for the present generation because as time goes by, the coming generations may abandon such traditions; in other words, social value, as all other values, is transitory [32]. These examples show that “Communities, are diverse, fragmented and complex; some are progressive, some are not” ([47], 3) and therefore there can be no universal significance; what is significant to one set of the community will be insignificant to the other.

The attribution of values to heritage, whether done by experts, an individual who has experience in that heritage or a community, shows that heritage can be used to create and influence a whole range of important relations within a given society such as the establishment of power relations and dominance ([48], 41). Thus, as Smith [49] argues “what makes these things valuable and meaningful - what makes them “heritage”, or what makes the collection of rocks in a field “Stonehenge” - are the present-day cultural processes and activities that are undertaken at and around them, and of which they become a part.” Consequently, and as we shall shortly see below, a place is significant or (in)significant because somebody has decided to bestow or not to bestow certain values on that place. As the saying goes, beauty is in the eyes of the beholder; so is significance and (in)significance.

### **3. Significance in African cultural heritage**

Africa is rich in cultural heritage, and this ranges from the tangible heritage to the intangible heritage. The various elements of heritage provide communities with the opportunity to establish an active relationship between the present and the past. According to Munjeri [50], the interpretation of the tangible can only be done through the intangible. Thus, as Tosh [51] argues, oral history (intangible heritage) is “an effective instrument for re-creating the past” by virtue of being “the

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<sup>1</sup> The Buddhas of Bamiyan were two 6th-century monumental statues of Gautama Buddha carved into the side of a cliff in the Bamiyan valley in the Hazarajat region of central Afghanistan, at an elevation of 2500 metres (8200 ft). They were built between 507 CE (smaller) and 554 CE (larger). They were dynamited and destroyed in March 2001 by the Taliban, on orders from leader Mullah Mohammed Omar, after the Taliban government declared that they were idols.



authentic testimony of human life as it was actually experienced.” The custodians of heritage in most African communities were or in some cases still, are the elders, both male and female; in most cases, these elders have been specially chosen by the ancestors to be custodians of the heritage places, objects or memories (tales/myths). These elders will jealously guard both the tangible and intangible heritage (places, objects and memories) so that they can maintain them in the status that they received them; they cannot add or subtract anything. In other words, the significance of African heritage is passed down through the generations by the elders who are considered as the custodians of the indigenous knowledge. These custodians do not separate natural heritage from cultural heritage and therefore the intangible cultural heritage is perfectly interweaved with the tangible as well as with the supernatural.

A combination of factors that include colonialism, introduction of western education and Christianity and Islam, has seen Africa witness a confusion in the assessment of significance of its heritage places. This is largely because both the colonial administration and missionaries perceived African knowledge systems as negative and primitive and therefore, these systems as expressed through cultural heritage practices and places/objects were abhorred; for instance, Christian missionaries identified African religious shrines and other religious places as the abode of the devil [41]. Consequently, when the colonial government believed that a certain heritage place/object merited protection, provision was made, based on a western based value typology, for the protection of only the physical aspects of that heritage [2]. In colonial Zimbabwe (Rhodesia), for example, the site of Great Zimbabwe was, purely based on the value of its physical attributes, preserved; the values, such as spiritual and religious, that the local community attached to the site were ignored. Further, the colonial government used the physical value to bolster its claim that Great Zimbabwe was constructed by non-indigenous people [26]. On the other hand, the independent government of Zimbabwe has used both the western based value typology as well as the indigenous value systems to argue for an advanced ancient African civilization at Great Zimbabwe. Concomitantly, the same government of Zimbabwe has used a western based value typology to nominate the site into the World Heritage List. The same system of western versus indigenous value systems is also seen in South Africa where heritage sites such as the Voortrekker Monument and the Castle in Cape Town were established to uphold the history of the Afrikaner and the white colonial rulers. The experiences of the indigenous people of South Africa, such as the Khoisan, as well as the heritage of ordinary black people, were ignored. To ameliorate the situation, the post-apartheid government has set up the Freedom Park where the memories of the “other” South Africa are commemorated. These examples indicate that to a large extent as Tunbridge and Ashworth [52] have shown, heritage is often one-sided and therefore the significance of any heritage will vary from one community to another; from one period to another and that the same heritage place or object can have multiple significances; an heritage place/object can be insignificant to one group while significant to another. That notwithstanding however, we believe that with proper handling, the various significances can be married together in order to achieve a common value for the heritage place or object. This is because within every heritage place or object there are threads, whether positive or negative, that link the communities which experience that heritage. The weaving of these threads will lead to the understanding of the connections that exist between and within those communities or group of people experiencing that heritage. Understanding how the various groups value this heritage can therefore lead one, to the safeguarding of heritage as a valuable resource for future generations and two, to the achievement of social cohesion within the society.

Africa has a number of heritage places (monuments, distinctive sites, rock art and historic landscapes) which though they have been used by various communities as a means of preserving the collective memories of the communities at various stages of their development, the way of valuing and determining the significance of this heritage, has however, been a source of contradiction and conflict. For instance, for a long time, postcolonial Kenyan governments have not been at ease in recognising the role that the Mau Mau insurgency played in the liberation of Kenya to the extent that the proscription of the Mau Mau movement put in place by the colonial government in 1952, remained in the statute books even after the attainment of independence in 1963 [53] and was only repealed in 2003. In 2006 the new government of Kenya erected in Nairobi, the statue of Dedan Kimathi, the Mau Mau general who was executed by the British in 1957. Kimathi clad in military regalia, holds a rifle on the right hand and a dagger on the other, symbolising the last weapons he held. This was a way of the new democratically elected government, in contrast to the other two previous (despotic) postcolonial governments, acknowledging the significance of the Mau Mau rebellion in the liberation of Kenya; the statue has thus been used to give significance to an event that some of the populace did not acknowledge as being of any significance to their lives [3]. The same is the story in South Africa, where after the end of apartheid in 1994, the new government instituted the Legacy Project, in which it encouraged the founding of post-apartheid heritage institutions such as the Apartheid Museum, District Six Museum and Freedom Park that were given the responsibility of using heritage as an avenue for forging a new national identity for South Africa [54]. These institutions were to create new significances for heritage that will be used in articulating the values of the new dispensation as well as contributing to cultural empowerment of formerly disadvantaged communities ([3], 13; [54], 95). The significances attached to these new heritages by the post-apartheid government and the general populace was however, contested by those who benefited during the apartheid era. The new heritages were insignificant to them though they were seen by the post-apartheid government as being significant in the construction of a new South Africa.

As said before, an outsider heritage practitioner will find it difficult to understand the significance of a heritage place without talking to the local community. This is remarkably so at the site of Osun-Osogbo, a sacred grove in southern Nigeria. The grove is regarded as the home of Osun, the goddess of fertility and is dotted with sanctuaries and shrines, sculptures and art works in honour of Osun and other deities. As in other parts of Africa, the magico-supernatural has been interwoven into the Osun-Osogbo landscape, thus enhancing the significance of the site; the tangible and the intangible have been intertwined together to tell the story of the founding of the site and identity of the Yoruba people. The Osogbo Heritage Council has, without writing anything down, used the shrines and sculptures inside the Osogbo site as a way of telling both the legendary and traditional history of Osogbo [55]. The legendary history is about the goddess Osun or Oso Igbo who is attributed to be the founder of Osogbo while the traditional history is about the coming of Laroye and Timehin in the 17th century and their encounter with the goddess and establishment of a settlement on the banks of the Osun River. Thus, the shrines and sculptures at the site have been used to provide significance and identity to the Yoruba people as they tell the migration history of the people of Osogbo ([55], 49). This significance can however, only be understood by the Yoruba people; no outsider can understand the significant role that each of the sculptures at the site have for the construction of the identity of the Yoruba people.

The Sacred Mijikenda Kaya Forests in the Kenya coast are another good example on how what is significant to one group or individual can be insignificant to another. The Kaya forests are remnants of a once extensive Eastern Africa lowland

forest. The coming into being of these sacred forests is linked to the development of the Mijikenda ethnic group; a grouping that comprises nine communities speaking a mutually intelligible same language save for dialect diversity and, who claim descent from one ancestral area of Shungwaya [56, 57]. In their oral traditions, the Mijikenda claim that when their ancestors arrived in their present area, more than 600 years ago, to protect themselves from marauding neighbours, they set homesteads or *Kayas* in six fortified hilltops. Later the communities started to settle outside the fortified forests but the local elders, through the council of elders, continued to protect the original *Kayas* as sacred places and burial grounds [58, 59]. The memorial posts or *vigango* that are placed at the head of the graves of departed elders, connect the living with the dead and guarantees that the departed elders continue to protect the living from misfortunes. The governance structure is led by the Council of Elders who are responsible for enforcing the rules and regulations of the *kayas* as handed down to them by their forbears. This system is well understood by all community members and offenders conform to any punishment meted out to them by the Council of elders. In 2007, the Kenya government applied for the listing of the *Kayas* in the World Heritage List. Subsequently an evaluation team was sent by the World Heritage Centre to evaluate the site and the nomination. After visiting the site, the team made its recommendations but one that baffled the locals, was the assertion by the team that the *Kayas* did not seem to have a strong management system. This despite the fact that the team had been introduced to the council of elders who manage the site; despite the fact that the sites could not have been preserved to that particular moment were it not for the activities of the council of elders in enforcing the traditional rules and regulations. The point then is that this evaluation team did not recognise or understand the significance of the management system led by the council of elders. To the evaluation team therefore, the *kayas* were insignificant because they did not have a clear management system as understood in the western world. The council of elders were not a management system and therefore the *kayas* did not meet the criteria of significance. To the local community however, the *kayas* were the most significant heritage place and the council of elders was the most significant aspect for the maintenance of not only the *kayas*, but the physical and wellbeing of the entire community. This case illustrates how heritage practitioners schooled in the western paradigm, are unable to appreciate the “sacramental nature of the landscape” [60], as held by the local community. As Byrne [61] argues, “to reconcile heritage practice and “the supernatural”, we need to better understand the context our practice has in modernity.” That is when the significance of the “other” will be our significance.

The (in)significance of heritage places is well documented when it comes to open spaces. Places that have no built physical structure but which people have imbued significance because of the activities that are carried or used to be carried out there. One such example is the Freedom Corner, inside Uhuru Park in Nairobi, Kenya. In 1991, women democracy activists used this place to demand the release of opposition politicians who had been detained by the regime of then President Moi. Subsequently, whenever the opposition wanted something from the government, they would congregate at the site. This part of the park has since then become a significant focal point for critics of every Kenyan government; it is therefore a significant element for the democratisation of the Kenyan nation. In late 2015 however, the British government, as part of its response to a petition in the British courts by the Mau Mau war veterans asking for compensation for atrocities committed against them by the Kenya colonial government, built in a section of Freedom Corner, a Mau Mau remembrance monument [62]. One can argue that the choosing of the Freedom Corner as the home for the Mau Mau monument was an acknowledgement of the significance of the Freedom Corner in the democratisation of the



Kenyan nation and therefore, the Mau Mau rebellion being a precursor of the later struggles, had no other better place to be commemorated other than the Freedom Corner. On the other hand, one can argue that since the Freedom Corner is on the far part of Uhuru Park, where people do not frequently visit, the aim of the British in constructing the Mau Mau monument there was to show the insignificance of the Mau Mau rebellion to the British and what better place to do so than an obscure space of a popular park!!

Indeed, the fact that different individuals, groups of people and communities value a heritage place, site or object differently and according to the exigencies of the time, was seen during the debates for the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes from outside both the University of Cape Town in South Africa and Oriel College in Oxford. In South Africa, one of the protesters said that the call for the removal of the statue is a “metaphorical call for the transformation of the University of Cape Town’s culture and faculty, which many blacks feel are alienating and still reflect a Eurocentric heritage” [63]. In the same vein, one Oxford student who did not want the statue removed said, “The Rhodes statue stands as a reminder that we have a long way to go in accepting our history..... the statue should stay and remind us that Oxford has much to do to redress its racial imbalances” [64]. These exchanges show that heritage is a dynamic and contested element whose significance or insignificance is constructed separately by different groups of people and this makes it difficult for one group to claim to have powers of determining significance of a heritage site or object.

Just as the authorities, through what Smith [49] calls Authorised Heritage Discourse are able to use heritage to foster their hegemony, the subalterns do also usurp the same heritage to give voice to their story; their construction of significance of a heritage will be different from that of the authorities or superior communities. The example that comes to mind is that of the 19th century runaway slaves (*watoro*) of the Kenya coast. When these slaves ran away from their masters, they were either integrated into the indigenous communities, joined the Christian mission stations or formed their own independent settlements in the coastal hinterland where it was easier for the runaways to avoid recapture by their masters. Some of such independent settlements include the sites of Koromio and Makoroboi in present day Kilifi County (Marshall, 2011).

The slaves in coastal Kenya came from all over Eastern Africa, but in particular from southern Tanzania, Mozambique, some parts of Kenya and the majority coming from Nyasaland (present day Malawi). Determined that their geographical and cultural identities are not lost, the *watoro* re-introduced several of the dances from their original homeland that had become insignificant during their enslavement. Such dances included *kimungwe*, *kinyasa*, *kindimba*, *kunju*, and *kinyago* [65]. Though these dances enabled the former slaves to remember their origins, these former slaves and their offspring however, influenced these dances to their benefit in such a way that the freeborn indigenous Mijikenda, and who owned the land on which the *watoro* lived, became for a little time inferior to these ex-slaves. Though *kinyago* is an entertainment dance, the *watoro* made it a contested arena to enable them become different from the Mijikenda, as well as the former plantation slaves who had been liberated under the 1907 abolition ordinance. First, though *kinyago* is a dance that can be used to entertain people, the *watoro* however, turned it into a contested field in order to enable them be differentiated not only from the Mijikenda neighbours, but from the other ex-slaves, the former plantation slaves who had been liberated under the 1907 abolition ordinance.<sup>2</sup> The *watoro*, having

<sup>2</sup> In 1907, The East Africa Protectorate (Between 1895 and 1920, Kenya was formally known as British East Africa Protectorate; between 1920 and 1963, as Kenya Colony and Protectorate) passed an ordinance outlawing slavery.



run away from their masters, considered themselves superior to the other ex-slaves who refused to run away from their masters but instead had waited for European driven emancipation.

To reinforce their authority over the liberated plantation slaves and the Mijikenda, the watoro turned the kinyago into an oracle that was controlled by a powerful cult known as mzinda and which was governed by strict regulations. Any person who transgressed the oracle was heavily penalised. Such punishment amongst others, was said to include the miraculous death of the offender. The watoro therefore, considered themselves as the authentic custodian of the Nyasa heritage and did several other things to ensure the preservation and sustainability of that heritage. To maintain the secrecy of the kinyago tradition, the performers used coded language and composed kinyago songs in the Nyasa language. Masquerades were also made at secret sites in nearby forests while the kinyago was performed at uwanja, an arena that was guarded by a protective charm (fingo) that guarded against the evil spirits. These steps enabled the watoro to safeguard the understanding of the meanings of the kinyago by the Mijikenda unless the watoro taught them. The outcome was the presentation of the kinyago as a mysterious and honored ceremony that only a fortunate few, in this case the watoro kinyago elders, had the key to its appreciation. Therefore, the significance of the kinyago ritual is sealed within the watoro community while to other people, it is an inconsequential ritual. In a cunning way, however, the watoro (subalterns) used the significance of the kinyago to build ties with the Mijikenda community and therefore gain status within the larger community [66, 67].

That significance or insignificance is a construct and depends on the socio-political environment and demands of the time is also demonstrated by the village of Shimoni on the Kenyan south coast where though the usage of a cave as a slave pen is contested by the various village communities, these communities are however, marketing the cave to tourists as a slave cave. The presentation of the cave by the Shimoni communities as a significant element of Kenya's slave heritage is done despite the fact that Kenya's national government has not recognised any slave heritage in the country. Thus, the local community, the subalterns, have recognised the significance in the development of slave narrative in Kenya while the government has not done so. The inhabitants (subalterns) of Shimoni have used their own value typologies that are directly opposite to that of the national paradigm (Authorised Heritage Discourse) to construct the Shimoni cave as a significant element of slave heritage in Kenya; this is directly challenging the hegemonic / dominant national paradigm which considers the cave and indeed slavery as an insignificant element in the national narrative [3].

## **4. Conclusion**

This paper has briefly looked at the way significance/insignificance has been constructed. Using various examples from different parts of Africa, it has been shown that significance is a construct that depends on the dictates of the time that includes the socio-political environment within which a community operates. The paper argues that consequently the use of the significance criteria in selecting sites for listing in the World Heritage List may be misplaced because the question that needs asking is whose criteria is it that is used in determining the significance of the site- is that of the professionals/UNESCO or is that of the local community? As Dickerson [24] asks, "how localised can this 'us' be and yet still allow us to make sense of notions like expertise, knowledge, professionalism, and public institutions? because "to claim any 'us' is to speak for, on behalf of, a community – it is thus an exercise of power. What sorts of ethico-political responsibilities towards

communities does the making of significance judgments involve? As the examples we have provided above have shown, heritage is a hegemonic struggle between contending forces in society over who has the right to decide the destiny of the community – whether it is Obi the school teacher, who wants to get rid of “paganism” within the community – by fencing off the local path or, the local priest who wants to preserve the path that they use to bury their dead and commune with the ancestors and thus ensure the sustainability of the community [66]. Both Obi and the elder are claiming an “us” on whose behalf they are making significant judgments regarding the heritage place.

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## Notes on contributor

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